

Sermon for 4 Advent
December 20, 2020
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- [2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16](#)
- [Romans 16:25-27](#)
- [Luke 1:26-38](#)
- [Canticle 15](#)

“Like the sun in the morning sky,
The Savior of the world will dawn;
Like rain upon the meadows,
The Christ will come down upon us.”

When I moved to California from Boston, it was September. Rain came early that year, drenching the hillsides of Annadel State Park so that waterfalls flowed down rocky, mossy hillsides, seeping out of fern beds under redwoods, rushing into seasonal streams. I hiked there as much as I could because it refreshed my soul. I walked in sun and rain and felt God’s unconditional love wash over me and this wondrous creation, clearing away grief and painful memories to walk new paths in this place. Then spring came, and it was glorious. Forsythia and poppies bloomed in our yard, followed by wild roses, lavender, even wild garlic. It was sunny and dry. I waited for the rain. And waited. And waited. Soon flowers and plants in the garden were turning brown, wilting, and dying for lack of water. The hose I picked up felt inadequate in the face of what was becoming a vast wasteland. Grief held on. It was a Sonoma summer.

We live in a time when it is easy to feel inadequate to what we are facing. The fear and perils of the pandemic, destruction from firestorms, aching grief of loss of loved ones, shrinking personal budgets, cyber-sabotage of our national infrastructure, systemic racism, unease in how we will live through the holiday season with and without family or friends, all these hover over our souls like the vast sere wasteland in my garden that summer, before I realized what an irrigation system was.

An irrigation system can help the garden, as a caring neighbor taught me, but we as human beings need more than that. We need God to come down on our sere and wasted souls. That’s why I love that promise I read every morning in Advent in the Franciscan Daily Office book, Common Prayer.

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We come together today to worship God who comes down like rain upon David, a King, Mary, a maiden without royal lineage. Through the prophet Nathan, God comes to David with an inconceivable promise in a world of warring kingdoms. “I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more;...I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.” Only God could have said this.

Through the angel Gabriel, God comes to a young Jewish unwed woman named Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Only God could have said this.

Into the midst of their everyday lives, governing a powerful nation from a throne, or planning a simple wedding in an ethnic community barely tolerated by conquering Romans, God comes unexpectedly with surprising news, unexpected news, a good Word for the people of God.

Nathan’s message must have surprised David, who only wanted to build a house for the Ark of the Covenant. Then David hears what God thinks about his dream, “Are you the one to build me a house? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt...did I ever ask “why have you not built me a house of cedar?” David reminds me so much of how Peter at the Transfiguration wanted to build dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah.

But God will not be live in a house built by David or Peter. God’s love will not be contained, controlled or tamed by enclosing our expectations of God’s desires, of God’s call to us. God’s love and call will be revealed when God comes to us wherever we are—in a royal palace in Jerusalem, or a small town called Nazareth, on a hilltop with Jesus, or in our own darkest nights, wildest wildernesses, driest deserts, and fiercest storms. When our world is too dangerous and our dreams are too small, God will come.

The angel Gabriel comes to Mary, betrothed to Joseph in the line of David, not in a sanctuary consecrated to the Lord, but a backwater town called Nazareth, a remote agricultural village on the road to Egypt whose name is never mentioned in the Hebrews scriptures. Gabriel comes from God, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed ... and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.” Mary ponders, and asks, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Mary and the Angel engage in a holy conversation. She invites God’s messenger to hear her out. And the angel does. “The child will be born of the Holy Spirit... he will be holy... he will be called the Son of God.” God acts not only in Mary’s life, but in Elizabeth’s, the long-barren one. “For nothing is impossible with God.” Then Mary accepts God’s unlikely word. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” She asks God’s messenger to speak, she accepts God’s promise. How brave she is to accept God’s call when she could have demurred.

That doesn’t mean Mary welcomed the news! There’s a difference. To welcome is to see a guest whose [arrival](#) is a cause of [joy](#); to receive a person or news with gladness. It would take time for Mary, or any of us for that matter, to ponder the words of the angel. That’s how we understand God’s call to us, God’s truth about who we are, whose we are, and how we are to live with one another with peace, justice and compassion. Advent is a time of “coming.” God comes to us with a call, and we come to God with all our questions, open hearts, ears to hear, and minds to reject or accept God’s call, God who may think our dreams too small, God whose Love is greater than we can ever expect.

For Mary, I imagine Gabriel’s news came with a hovering awareness of the precariousness of her engagement to Joseph, of her vulnerability as an unwed mother in her family and small town, her uncertain future even as a married Jewish family in nation dominated by gentile Romans. “How can this be?” So Mary seeks out Elizabeth, loving kin who exclaims at the door, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ... For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

I wonder how hard it was and how long it took for Mary to process what was happening, to let go of “how can this be?” to feel blessed, to believe, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.” Did Mary really sing this song of praise at Elizabeth’s door, as it

seems in this text? Or did it take hours, days or even months for her to understand her blessing, to come to joy?

As someone who finds it all too easy to imagine the worst, to recall the darkness that has befallen me in times past, the only thing that makes it plausible to me that Mary sang the Magnificat at Elizabeth's door is that Mary hears Elizabeth's affirmation of her call as she recalls the angels' assurance, "For with God, nothing is impossible." "For with God, nothing is impossible." There is the proof right before her. Elizabeth, the barren one, is pregnant. And Elizabeth, bless her heart, welcomes Mary. Through Mary's open, vulnerable, courageous relationship with the angel and then with Elizabeth who invites her to stay when the world would surely shun her, Mary trusts that God has indeed come to her. She welcomes God's promise with joy.

Mary is so full of joy she proclaims the epic story of God's coming to earth among her people. As David did before her in psalms, she witnesses, "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Mary may have been poor, her kinfolk persecuted by the Romans, and her mind overflowing with anxiety about her pregnancy, yet even so, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." God our Savior has always come, comes now, and will come forever to withered souls in dangerous times with healing waters and the promise of abundant life.

Being God's people is never easy. David, Mary and even Elizabeth all come to understand this in their myriad of heartbreaks and griefs. Our expectations of God and hopes for ourselves will be shattered by the realities of nature that does not bend to our wills, systems of social and economic injustice, limits of science and medicine to heal, oppression and inequality that marginalize the weak and powerless, and people we trust who may hurt or betray us, however unintentionally. Mary's "how can this be?" echoes in all of us when our souls are dried out for lack of rain. That's when angels bring good news, friends old and new open their doors to us even when we are at our worst, and we come to life again, to trust again.

One theologian has suggested that happiness is receiving what we want, but joy comes in receiving what our souls need. We may not even know what that is until we seek, ponder, and gratefully receive it. It's often the surprise we didn't expect,

as in Gabriel's promise of a child from the lineage of David who would be Savior. Mary welcomes this truth because God comes to her, she dares to ask the angel a question, she listens to him, and whenever fears rise, Elizabeth is at her side. Mary welcomes God's word knowing nothing of the future.

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